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TSPL, KISL, BE

SUBJECT: EMBASSY BRUSSELS FOLLOW UP ON CAIRO SPEECH

REF: BRUSSELS 853

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Post is actively engaged with Belgium's Muslim communities. Charge Bush used the occasion of the President's Cairo speech to host a special outreach luncheon on June 10 with key Muslim contacts (please see reftel). Muslims in Belgium took great interest in the President's speech, and were indeed hopeful that the United States would take action on several themes he mentioned. Post is already planning a robust outreach plan for FY 2009, and is engaged with stakeholders in Muslim communities and with local and federal government leaders. End Summary.

Charge's Muslim Outreach Luncheon

¶2. (SBU) The Charge's June 10 luncheon, held after the President's Cairo speech, included Muslim stakeholders from business, academia, government, and media. A strong over-arching theme in the guests' comments (reftel) was the need to improve integration of Muslims in Belgium, and counter the sense of alienation many of them feel. Above all else, Muslims in Belgium want to be accepted as Belgians, as part of the community, with the education and employment opportunities available to other Belgians. They also want to preserve their religious identity - encouraging respect for diversity is important to them.

¶3. (SBU) The areas of engagement from the speech that received the most interest were human and economic development. One guest noted that many in the Muslim world have noted that the U.S. is often close to undemocratic regimes. As Belgian-Muslims, the guests argued strongly for the need to promote democracy and human rights in the Muslim world. One guest stressed that education for women was the best path to their empowerment, rather than debating the wearing of the head scarf. She noted that men in non-Muslim-majority countries are more focused on the head scarf than women, and that the head scarf was a religious rather than a women's issue. The guests urged the U.S. to continue to promote trade and economic development in the Muslim world. Weaker economies and lack of opportunity are the main reasons Europe's Muslims chose to emigrate, they said. Reftel also underscores the strong concern the guests had about U.S. handling of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Post's Muslim Engagement Plans

¶4. (SBU) This fall, the public diplomacy (PD) section will organize the Mission's fifth annual Iftar, to be hosted by the Ambassador on September 14. PD has also scheduled an

American Muslim stand-up comedian to engage with young minority (mainly Muslim) audiences as part of the Citizen Dialogue program. During this same time-frame, PD is sending a Belgian police commissioner to the Annual International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) Conference in Denver, Colorado, as well as to the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, among others, to discuss and consult with U.S. counterparts and terrorism experts on U.S. community policing approaches. PD has also identified two young Muslim leaders to go to the U.S. under the framework of the International Visitors Program: one to attend the regional program on U.S. Approaches to Community Empowerment for Marginalized Youth; the other to attend Current U.S. Political, Social, and Educational Issues for Young Muslim Leaders. PD will continue to include Muslim contacts on guest lists in order to invite them to a variety of cultural and informational programs along with other Belgians. PD will highlight U.S. initiatives of particular interest to Muslims on Post's websites, and it will draw on its already substantial network of Muslim exchange program alumni to engage others in their respective communities in order to broaden and deepen that network.

15. (SBU) The political section plans to meet regularly with elected officials in local communities such as Molenbeek, Anderlecht, Borgerhout, and Hasselt to better understand local efforts to communicate with Muslim stakeholders in these predominantly Muslim neighborhoods. Political also plans to meet with federal officials who lead on integration and anti-radicalization efforts.

Comment

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16. (SBU) Post has solid contacts in Belgium's Muslim communities and with government officials who work with Belgium's Muslims. We will continue our efforts to promote outreach to Muslims and understand the GOB's integration efforts. The President's speech was well received in Belgium and served as a reminder that Muslim engagement is a priority for the .S. government.

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